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Barry Cronin is a consultant on Educational Media and Technology. In that capacity he has served on the Technical Advisory Committee for the American Foundation for the Blind and has helped develop online and media applications for such companies as, Addison Wesley Longman Publishers, Nefield Publications and Colliers Multimedia Encyclopedia.

Prior to that Dr. Cronin was Editor, Children and Education, for News Corp/MCI Online Ventures. He developed online information and entertainment for children on the World Wide Web. Before joining New Corp he was Executive Director for Technology at the WGBH Educational Foundation in Boston. Having been at WGBH for 11 years, he was a pioneer in developing closed captioning services for hearing impaired people as well as having created the Descriptive Video Service (DVS) which makes television and movies understandable to blind and visually impaired people and the CPB/WGBH National Center for Accessible Media. He also established the Interactive Technology department at WGBH, developing interactive videodisks and CD-ROMs based on WGBH-produced programs such as NOVA and the American Experience.

Barry has a Ph.D. in communications from the University of Missouri and has held numerous educational positions including Academic Dean for a Boston junior college.



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challenging blindness

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23rd October 1996

Dear Margaret and Cody

Thank you for your fax of 14th October. It sounds as though you had just got back from a lovely trip.

The new broadcasting legislation that I mentioned is the 1996 Broadcasting Act. This became law in July this year and its main purpose is to outline how digital terrestrial television will develop in the UK. (It does not cover satellite broadcasting, for which we do not have any legislation.) There will be a change in the way terrestrial television operates as a two-tier system of licensing and regulating will be introduced.

As the first stage companies will have to tender to run a multiplex. This means that a company can have a number of broadcasting companies providing material for its overall output. These organisations will be the programme service providers. Both the multiplex owners and the programme service providers will operate under a licence issued by the Independent Television Commission, which will be the regulatory body for the legislation. The ITC currently regulates commercial television in the UK (Channels 3, 4, 5, and cable). The existing broadcasters - Channels 3, 4, 5 and the BBC - are guaranteed places on the multiplexes for their existing services, which they will run simultaneously with their analogue services. They can offer new, digital only services, if they want to widen their output.

Digital terrestrial television is expected to be available in mid-1998 and viewers will need a special digital receiver ("set-top" box). This will connect to existing television sets to provide better quality pictures and sound, and many additional channels. In addition some, if not all, receivers will have AUDETEL capability. This is not built-in to the legislation but will come about from our discussions with broadcasters and the receiver manufacturing industry. Audio description will be carried by a sound channel. This is a considerable advantage over the AUDETEL system we had expected to adopt with our, current, analogue television system - which would have used a teletext line. In due course digital television sets will be available but initially these will be very expensive. Analogue services will continue to run for a number of years but eventually will be switched off. This timescale has not been set but is expected to be 10-15 years after digital starts.

This Act contains a clause (Clause 20) which addresses the needs of visually impaired, and deaf and hard of hearing people. The ITC has the responsibility to draw up a code of guidance, with relevant organisations such as RNIB, on the implementation of the Act.

The code needs to identify "the extent to which digital programme services and qualifying services should promote the understanding and enjoyment by persons who are blind or partially-sighted, of the programmes to be included in such services, and the means by which such understanding and enjoyment should be promoted". The main provision is that "at least 10% of so much of the service as consists of programmes which are not excluded programmes in relation to audio description for the blind is to be accompanied by such audio description". Although the Government introduced the idea of excluded programmes it has not identified them, leaving this to the ITC to do with the relevant organisations.

Unfortunately this provision was not included in the earlier stages of the Bill so we were not able to prepare for this in advance. We do not approve of excluding any programme categories, although some programmes do not obviously lend themselves to audio description. In addition a separate clause does allow for the Secretary of State, at some later date, to substitute the percentage - we assume that this means an increase!

I have had one informal meeting with a representative of the ITC on the code, where he outlined the categories that the ITC thinks could be excluded. We did not agree on many! We started to discuss the 10% quota and how much programming could be audio described in the early stages of digital television. We did not get very far with this as, once again, we had differing views on start-up figures, and subsequent increases.

I have a meeting later today with an AUDETEL working party (representatives from RNIB, National Federation of the Blind, Guide Dogs Association and the Retinitis Pigmentosa Society) to discuss the issues before a formal, negotiating, meeting is convened with the ITC.

In December some sections of the UK's Disability Discrimination Act come into force. Whilst this Act is not ideal it should offer some improvements in the provision of goods, facilities and services for visually impaired people. Broadcasting is covered in the services section so between them these two new pieces of legislation should make a considerable difference to visually impaired people in the UK over the next few years.

In addition to the work that I am doing on AUDETEL I am developing RNIB's audio described video service. We have currently 19 titles available, with three more being released in December and four in the pipeline for next year. We have established a good working relationship with Buena Vista Home Entertainment, which is extremely supportive. Whilst we have provided a few titles from other companies it has been much more difficult to get the same level of co-operation. Whilst I get some income from RNIB's fundraisers specifically

for the videos it is not enough to develop the service as quickly, with as wide a range of titles, as we would like to achieve.

We provide the videos for two purposes. One is to provide an audio described home video service in its own right, the other is to provide demonstration material for raising awareness. This latter point is becoming more important as we get nearer to the introduction of an AUDETEL service, as we are trying to make as many visually impaired people aware of audio description as possible. This will, I think, be essential when trying to convince people to invest in the digital receiver.


I was very interested in the work that you mentioned in trying to get the audio description of films done at the time of production. Last year two colleagues and I put together a paper for RNIB management addressing all aspects of audio description. This was in a bid to get some funding to get someone in to research all the elements necessary to have a cohesive audio description policy. This paper included the need of addressing the film industry and the cinema chains. Unfortunately we did not get the necessary funding but the issue has recently been raised again and I hope that this time we can seriously address the situation. I believe that the way to get widespread audio description for the recorded medium is to have it done at time of production so that the description can accompany the film for cinema, rental and sell-through video, and satellite, cable and terrestrial television. I would, therefore, be very interested to hear more about your work to date, and your plans. I was wondering if you would like to write a piece for the next AUDETEL Newsletter on this issue.

I have asked Jaclyn Packer if she would like to provide a summary of the "Who's Listening" research for the Newsletter. If you are able to provide a piece I would like about 400 words, by Friday, 15th November, and the two pieces would give a good overview of what is happening currently in the USA. It will link also to a piece that I will be doing on our latest video releases.

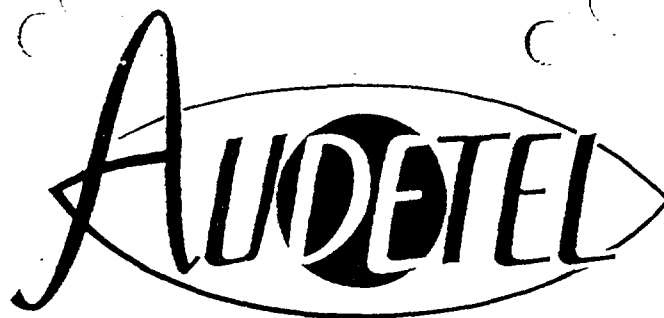
I hope that the overview of the legislation will be helpful and that you will be able to do a piece for the Newsletter. If I can provide any further information please do not hesitate to contact me. (For information I am in the office this week, until about 1500 on Friday, but on leave next week.)

I look forward to hearing from you. With best wishes.

Yours sincerely



(Denise Evans)
Broadcasting Officer



The European

AUDETEL PROJECT

Newsletter

January 1997

Bringing television to life
for visually impaired audiences

Avec résumé français

Mit deutscher Zusammenfassung

THE EUROPEAN AUDETEL PROJECT: AUDIO DESCRIPTION ON TELEVISION

In this issue of the Newsletter

- digital television developments
- audio description in Germany
- the World Blind Union resolution on television
- developments in the USA
- audio described videos from RNIB.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND DIGITAL TELEVISION

In July the 1996 Broadcasting Act became the first piece of UK legislation to include targets for audio description, linked to digital terrestrial television transmissions which are expected to start in mid-1998. The main provisions:

- licensing of terrestrial television multiplexes and digital programme services
- teletext services
- promotion of equal opportunities and fair treatment
- licensing of terrestrial sound broadcasting - multiplexes and providers
- the merging of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Council to form a new Broadcasting Standards Commission.

Within the provisions for digital terrestrial television there are clauses that relate to the audio description of television programmes. The Act provides for the Independent Television Commission (the regulatory body) to draw up a code of guidance relating to "the extent to which digital programme services and qualifying services should promote the understanding and enjoyment by persons who are blind or partially sighted".

Clause 20 of the Act outlines how television programmes can be made more accessible by audio description (and by the provision of sub-titling and signing for deaf and hard of hearing people). By the tenth anniversary of a digital programme service provider's licence at least 10% of non-excluded programmes each week must have audio description. The Act does not outline how this target is to be achieved or what constitutes the non-excluded programmes. These issues will be determined by the ITC in collaboration with relevant organisations. The code of guidance will be available in early 1997, in a range of formats, and will be given to all licence holders.

Targets were included in the Broadcasting Act after considerable campaigning by organisations and individuals. As the Bill did not contain specific details when it was first published organisations of and for visually impaired and deaf and hard of hearing people joined forces to campaign for targets. Although considerable representation was made during the various stages of the Bill in the House of Lords, there was no improvement in the situation.

However, the lobbying gained the support of Robert Hughes (MP for Harrow West) who led a successful campaign to get targets introduced at Committee Stage in the House of Commons. The target for audio description was 50% of programmes by the tenth year of the licence! However, the Government felt that this percentage was too high and made a counter-proposal, which was accepted by Robert Hughes.

So, whilst disappointed that 50% was not the final figure, RNIB was very pleased that for the first time in broadcasting legislation in the UK broadcasters have a specific target for the provision of audio description. ✓

In addition, Clause 21 does provide for the Secretary of State to substitute the percentage, by order - hopefully with an increase!

As well as providing AUDETEL, digital television offers better quality pictures and sound and the opportunity to receive many more channels. In the UK the existing terrestrial television channels (BBC-1, BBC-2, Channels 3, 4, and 5, S4C) will be able to transmit their analogue programmes digitally. They will be able also, if they wish, to set up new services. In addition, new programme service providers are expected to take the opportunity to bid for the multiplex licences, so there is the potential for a wider choice of programming.

Of course, terrestrial television is not the only digital development. Digital satellite television is expected to start in the UK in the autumn of 1997 with a launch by BSkyB. Elsewhere in Europe Canal Plus and the Kirch Group have already established digital satellite services.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION IN GERMANY: BAVARIA TAKING THE LEAD

Elmar Dosch, of the Bavarian Blind Union reports:

Bayerischer Rundfunk could be the first of Germany's regional broadcasters to allocate a specific budget to audio description. The final go-ahead has not been given yet but is expected imminently. There are plans to give around DM 100,000 (£40,000) to the description of several TV programmes. Visually impaired people in Bavaria, who are very keen on audio description, would be delighted.

The Bavarian Blind Union has conducted a survey on audio description of television. Results show a strong interest in audio description. Questionnaires

were sent to 2,600 visually impaired people aged 20-60 and nearly half responded. The key findings are:

- * 97% own a television set
- * 81% watch television regularly
- * 90% would like audio description of television
- * 92% would like the Bavarian Blind Union to promote regular audio description of television programmes

Respondents would like audio description for specific programme categories:

- * 19% for talk-shows
- * 31% for magazine programmes
- * 36% for Westerns
- * 38% for news programmes
- * 39% for sports programmes
- * 52% for documentaries
- * 60% for police drama series
- * 82% for television films

How should we read these provisional figures? There have already been several described programmes on German television and the Bavarian Blind Union has given audio description in the cinema a high profile over the past few years. But many respondents will never have experienced audio description. They all have a personal experience of television viewing and of difficulties experienced in following a programme. They express an understanding of the usefulness of additional description for television programmes. Direct experience of description tends to skew perceptions toward broader endorsement of audio description on television.

The figures establish the value of audio description and strong consumer demand. Also they reinforce and validate key findings of surveys on audio description of television made in other countries.

WORLD BLIND UNION RESOLUTION 'Access to Digital Television'

The WBU has passed a resolution which calls on legislators, broadcasters, and receiver manufacturers to make an active commitment to audio description.

"Whereas television plays an important role for education and social and cultural integration, and is a highly popular pastime of visually impaired people; and

Whereas visually impaired people miss out on crucial information due to the high visual content of television programmes; and

Whereas audio description (a narration describing action, body-language, facial expression and scenery) already enables thousands of visually impaired people to enjoy television in some countries; and

Whereas national surveys show that the vast majority of visually impaired people want and need audio description of television programmes; and

Whereas article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right of everyone to take part in the cultural life of the community and to benefit from scientific advancements; and

Whereas in some countries broadcasting legislation already recognises the right of visually impaired people to enjoy television with audio description; and

Whereas the advent of digital television (which will make many more channels available) provides a technical solution for the transmission and reception of audio description; and

Whereas digital receivers must be easily usable by visually impaired people in order for digital television to be accessible to them,

This Fourth General Assembly of the World Blind Union, meeting in Toronto, August 26-29 1996, resolves to:

- (i) call on broadcasting legislators to recognise the right of visually impaired people to enjoy television and to dedicate a portion of digital transmission capacity to the audio description sound as and when digital television is being introduced; and
- (ii) call on broadcasters to make a commitment to their visually impaired audiences to introduce audio description services as soon as a method for the transmission of the audio description sound becomes available; and
- (iii) call on the co-operation of receiver manufacturers to incorporate the needs of blind and partially sighted people into the design of digital receivers."